DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 131 UD 024 431

AUTHOR Florander, Jesper
TITLE From the Bottom and Up. Flexible School Reform in a Decentralized System. The Case of Denmark.
PUB DATE Dec 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the International Conference on Education in the '90s: Equality, Equity and Excellence (1st, Tel-Aviv, Israel, December 16-19, 1984). Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Ability; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; *Foreign Countries; *Government Role; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Nondiscriminatory Education; Politics of Education; *Track System (Education)
IDENTIFIERS *Denmark

ABSTRACT

Over the last 10 years, Danish schools have made a rapid transition from a selective system to a comprehensive system. By 1990, it is estimated, practically no schools in Denmark will differentiate between "basic" and "advanced" students. Although most Western European countries have attempted comprehensive schooling, few have had Denmark's success. There are at least six reasons for this development: (1) Denmark is decentralized by tradition: crucial decisions are left to the local authorities, not the government. (2) Obligatory schooling has an exceptionally long tradition in Denmark. (3) For many years, Denmark has had a small number of students per class. (4) As a result of decentralization, there are few specific experimental schools or research and development centers. Reform is allowed to come from teachers themselves. (5) Denmark's innovative strategy is unsystematic and perhaps confusing, but it is pragmatic and it works. (6) This pragmatism, built in to every Danish school, permits deviation from government regulations and allows schools to respond to parents' opinions, pupils' home background, and the composition of the teaching staff. Innovations developed at schools often spread to other schools with little bureaucratic administration. Educational legislation is then changed to bring it more in line with daily school practice. The future of non-differentiation has yet to be decided politically. But equal education depends on non-differentiation, education of the individual to become a sound member of society. Teaching must be differentiated, not pupils. (KH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED261131

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jesper Florander

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

From the Bottom and up. Flexible School Reform in a Decentralized System. The Case of Denmark

1st International Conference on Education in the '90s.
Equality, Equity and Excellence.
Tel-Aviv, December 16-19, 1984

Jesper Florander
Director
Danish National Institute
of Educational Research
28 Hermodsgade
DK 2200 Copenhagen N
Denmark

UD 024 431

The ongoing development toward a comprehensive school.

Arguments against a selective school became more and more strong in Denmark after World War II, and the development toward a comprehensive school started slowly in the 1950's with experimental work with non-differentiated classes at three local authorities.

In 1958 it was allowed to make no streaming in the primary school (7 years). The principle corresponds to a teaching of mixed ability classes with a mixture of some subjects in common and individually tailored subject programs in the sense of Marklund (type B and C) (Marklund, 1984, p. 104).

In 1975 the Danish school convincingly broke with a selective principle during a new School Act stating a comprehensive principle (Act on the Folkeskole, 1979).

Until that time comprehensive schooling was only possible by permission granted through the innovation paragraph in the Danish School Act. Now both the primary and the lower secondary school (9 (10) years) might be comprehensive if so wanted (Act on the Folkeskole (The Danish Primary and Lower Secondary school), 1979).

A very quick development was following (Skov, P., 1984, p. 24-26), cf. table 1 and figure 1.

Table 1

Pupils in mixed ability grouping
in grade 8. 1977-84. Per cent

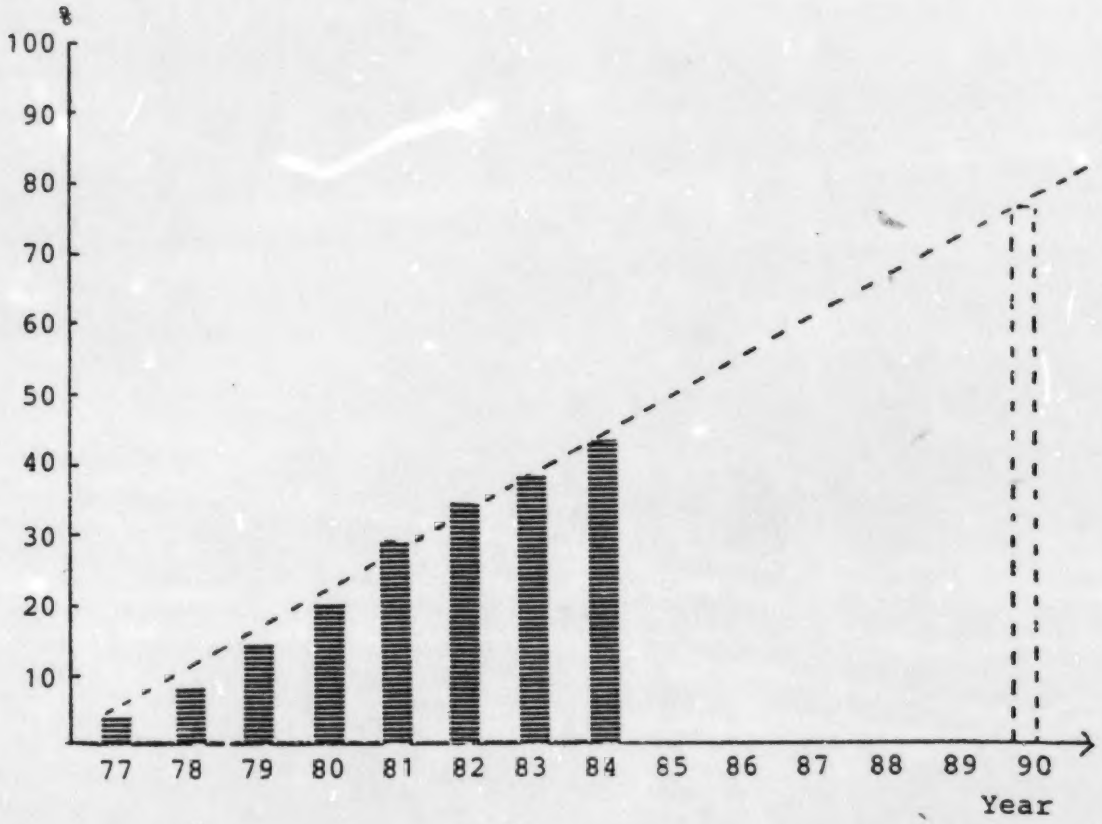
1977/78	5% of pupils
1978/79	-
1979/80	13%
1980/81	18%
1981/82	26%
1982/83	31%
1983/84	34%

In 1977 only 5% of the pupils in grade 8 were in mixed ability grouping. In 1983 the percentage has grown to 3-%.

And when you look upon the number of schools with mixed ability grouping for both primary and lower secondary school (the nine years of obligatory schooling) it can be seen from figure 1 that a very rapid development takes place. 1977 4% of the schools had mixed ability grouping, 1984 it is just over 40%.

Figure 1

Number of schools with mixed ability grouping in grade 8. 1977-90. Per cent



The figures cover the subjects mathematics and foreign languages (in Danish f.i. the pupils are never differentiated).

It can be estimated from figure 1 that in 1990 practically no schools will differentiate the pupils into the two courses until now commonly used - one basic and one advanced.

So, over a period of not much more than 10 years the Danish school system has been completely changed.

A common trend - but how far?

This may be seen in comparison with most Western European countries. The trend has been the same everywhere, educationalists and researchers pleading for the abolition of differentiated classes, streaming, tracking and other sorts of differentiation in advantage of non-differentiation and individualized teaching.

But in contrast to many countries Denmark has succeeded in this innovation. F.i. the Norwegian Board of Innovations in Education pointed out in 1971 that the reforming of the school with the then present rate of acceleration would last at least 30 years and this was looked upon as most unsatisfying in a fast changing community (Forsøksrådet for skoleverket, 1971).

Also The European Colloquy on Integration (in the European Academy at Otzenhausen) 1983 stated that although the most important question for a very long time had been that of non-differentiation and integration and has been emphasized unanimously by the European ministers of education as early as 1969, no common procedure of following this principle had been developed.

On the contrary, Western Germany, the Netherlands and France seem to be deadlocked in the discussion, and countries such as United Kingdom and Italy have only to some degree realized the principle (Dahmen, Breitenbach, Mitter & Wilhelmi, 1984, p. 151-259).

Reasons for the Danish development

So it is naturally asked and I quote John Sayer from England: "How does it come about that Denmark can have an almost idyllic doll's house scene, generously provided and totally supported?" (Sayer, 1983, p. 16).

The explanations are as follows.

1. Denmark is by tradition - and a good one too - decentralized (according to OECD extremely so!). That means that crucial decisions are left to the local authority, not made by the government. Of course, the parliament discuss and pass superior regulations, but first of all so that they are to be seen as a wide frame within which the local authority and the single school by itself can determine its pedagogical course.

2. Denmark has a very long tradition for obligatory schooling, starting in 1814 (Sweden, f.i. had no obligatory schooling before 1842 (Schultze, 1968, p. 218), and this not only on paper, but in reality.

3. Denmark has for rather many years had a small number of pupils per class. In 1984 it is on an average 18.5, where United Kingdom f.i. has an average of 29.4 (Compulsory Schooling in a Changing World, 1976, p. 50). This is clearly an advantage when you want to differentiate not the pupils but the teaching.

4. Because of the decentralized system in Denmark one is accustomed to and apt to not having specific experimental schools or certain R & D-centers. Instead, the general opinion is that school reforms should be allowed to come clearly from "the bottom", initiated by the teachers themselves - those who are "the men and women who have to put all these changes into operation (but) have tended to be forgotten." (Cane and Schroeder, 1970, p. 63).

This differs from the viewpoint of Marklund who holds the opinion that the development of a comprehensive school in Sweden to a high degree was due to a strongly centralized school system (Marklund, 1981, p. 188).

To me it looks like a centralized system will somehow delay innovations, and Marklund seems to contradict his own argumentation by stating that from 1980 the centralized system should be broken up and "- the local education authorities given increased responsibilities -" (Marklund, 1981, p. 190).

So both he and I see the advantages of a decentralized school system.

The philosophy behind this may be seen from the theoretical considerations of Rowland which denounces the ideas of experimental schools and R & D-centers to the preferation of a decentralized model where every school at any time should partake in some sort of innovation (Rowland, 1969).

5. However, an innovation strategy like f.i. Rowland's is not clearly cut out in the Danish considerations. It is much more founded upon a pragmatism which may be seen as rather unsystematic and therefore confusing, but which has proved its soundness in the daily life of schools. It simply works.

6. So for the whole century it has been a token of the Danish school acts that they have had a certain amount of pragmatism built in. They have all made allowances for every school to some extent to deviate from the regulations set by the government in order to develop their own innovation strategy fitting the single school's conditions: The parents' opinions, the pupils' home background, and the composition of the teaching staff.

The advantages of pragmatism

The Danish pragmatism functions in the following way:

If after some time a given innovation has been tried out by a sufficiently great number of schools and found to work in a satisfying way the regulations will be altered to fit with this practice, thus allowing more schools to install the innovation with nearly no bureaucratic administration. And when the innovation has spread - mostly by hearsay and by more or less conscious contacts between schools - the Danish government will make a proposal for a similar alteration of the school act.

An important factor in such a development is the Danish Government's Board for Educational Development which since 1969 has been supporting and following a lot of innovative work nearly all of it stemming from the ideas of single schools. From time to time the Board sums up what innovative work must now be looked upon as passing beyond that stage and so - directly or indirectly - pointing out that the legislators may now consider a modernization of the Danish school act more in accordance with daily school practice (The Government's Board for Educational Development, 1984).

An example of innovation strategy

A recent example of this can be seen in the research work on Danish non-differentiated classes in grade 10 (not obligatory). These classes come under the innovation paragraph and must be followed. In 1983/84 they constitute 6%, whereas ab. 60% of the pupils follow an advanced course and ab. 33% a basic course (Skov, 1984, p. 54).

The future development may be foreseen when a comparison is made with the former development within grade 10 and the on-going development within grades 8 and 9. The non-differentiated classes will grow in number. Especially the classes of the basic course will hastily diminish in such a way that in ab. two-three years it will be almost impossible to defend the retention of these classes - both for pedagogical and for economic reasons (Skov, 1984, p. 216-219).

And what is left is the decision on how the advanced course is going to be cancelled. For no doubt the non-differentiated classes will augment in number as foretold.

This decision will as usual be a political one. And hereby we leave the educational theatre and enter the political forum.

The political aspect of innovation

In Denmark as elsewhere the discussion on equal opportunities within education is heavily linked together with political aspects. Most challenging we have seen this from the report of USA's National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk" (see f.i. The Elementary School Journal, 1983). The message of this is simply: Back to basics. That cry we have heard before, this time one has only added a belief that modern technology can help diminishing the learning time. To me that is mostly a moral statement, based upon a rather primitive philosophy. If we take into account what this belief would lead to, I should like to draw to the attention the conclusions from a Danish investigation into the values and norms of the school as experienced by its users - pupils, teachers, parents and politicians (Skov, 1983). The conclusions are that if we "go back to basics" the whole education will be severely damaged. Not only subjects like religious studies, social sciences, music and arts, but also - and that is just as important - the elementary subjects as learning of the mother language, the literature, and mathematics. If so, a still greater number of pupils will be sorted out negatively - they will not be able to follow the usual teaching.

So that is no way for the future.

The future lies in the fact that people - and children - are different, in every aspect: height, eye colour, abilities, interests, diligence, etc. From that fact you can only deduce that if you want to give equal educational opportunities you will have to take into consideration that every individual has a right not only to education, but to an education according to its potential. The conclusion is that the future of the school does not lie in differentiation of pupils - irrespectively which of many names you disguise it with - but lies in the differentiation of teaching, as f.i. pointed out by Härnquist, Douglas and Passow. Härnquist shows that the intrapersonal variation constitutes the greater part of interpersonal variation and grows with age, thus indicating a strong need for individual teaching methods and programmes (Härnquist, 1960). Douglas makes clear that the individual's educational opportunities depend heavily on the pupil's home background (Douglas, 1964), and Passow emphasizes the necessity of going the whole way back to individualization (Passow, 1971, p. 23).

In Denmark the structure of the school system is under rapid change as told, so that we can certainly see the contours of the school in the '90s. What we have not achieved is much of the necessary change of the content of the teaching. There will be much to do in order to realize both the necessary individualization and the education of the individual as a member of a sound society. We have yet many obstacles to overcome. I quite agree with Marklund when he concludes "that an organizational change does not automatically produce the desired change in methods" (Marklund, 1984, p. 110).

But we are on the right way and shall continue to make innovations "from the bottom and up" - for the benefit of the teacher, the teaching, the education, the pupils and thereby the whole Danish society.

P.S. I have not even touched upon the level of attainment of the pupils in a real comprehensive school with mixed ability grouping all the way through.

Can you imagine why?

References

Act on the Folkeskole (The Danish Primary and Lower Secondary School). Ministry of Education, Danmark, 1975.

Cane, B. and C. Schroeder: The Teacher and Research. London: National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, 1970.

Compulsory Schooling in a Changing World. Paris: OECD, 1983.

Dahmen, Breitenbach, Mitter, Wilhelmi (eds.): Comprehensive Schools in Europe. Conclusions of a European Colloquy. Köln, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1984.

Douglas, J.W.B.: The Home and the School. A study of ability and attainment in the primary schools. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1964.

Forsøksrådet for Skoleverket: Om Gjennemføring av normalplanen. Information om forsøksarbeid nr. 1, 1971.

Härnquist, K.: Individuella differenser och skoldifferentiering (Individual differences and school differentiation). Stockholm: Statens Offentlige Utredningar 1960:13.

Marklund, S.: The Post-comprehensive Era of Swedish Education. Compare, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1981, 185-190.

Marklund, S.: Mixed Ability Teaching versus Streaming. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research No. 2, 1984, 102-110.

Passow, A.H.: Comprehensive versus Selective Education: The New Equality. International Review of Education, XVII, 1971.

Rowland, M.K.: A String of Beads. Planning and Managing Change. Occasional Paper No. 1 from International Learning Corporation, 1969, Fort Lauderdale.

Sayer, J.: Ideas for Integration. Times Educational Supplement. June 3., 1983.

Schultze, W. (ed.): Schools in Europe. Vol. I: Part A. Berlin: Julius Beltz, 1968.

Skov, P.: Værdinormer om skolen. Analyse af konfliktmuligheder og mulige udviklingslinjer i skolen ud fra empiriske undersøgelser (Attitudes to school - an analysis of prospects of conflict and conceivable trends in school based upon empirical studies). English summary p. 387-411. København: Munksgaard, 1983.

Skov, P.: Delt eller udelt skole? (On the way to mixed ability teaching). København: Danmarks pædagogiske Institut og Folkeskolens Forsøgsråd, 1984.

The Elementary School Journal, November 1983, Volume 84, Number 2.

The Government's Board for Educational Development: En orientering om skoleåret 1983/84 (Information about the school year 1983/84). The Government's Board for Educational Development No. 10. Copenhagen: The Government's Board for Educational Development, 1984.